

Direct Certification for Free Meal Benefits

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Direct certification is a simplified method of determining some children's eligibility for free meals under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) or School Breakfast Program (SBP) without having the family complete a free and reduced meal application. The State Office of School Food Services and Nutrition (SA) obtains documentation from the South Carolina Department of Social Services (DSS) that enables the School Food Authority (SFA) to determine that children are members of households currently certified to receive food stamps or Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF).

Eligibility Determination

Each year all SFAs receive a direct certification listing of children who qualify for Food Stamps/TANF and were enrolled in the SFA during the prior year. This information is secured through the use of the SASIxp database on file in the South Carolina Department of Education and a magnetic tape of all currently eligible Food Stamp/TANF recipients under age 21 from DSS. Children are listed alphabetically according to the school where they were enrolled in the first quarter of the calendar year and are eligible to receive free meals for the upcoming school year without further application. Households whose children are directly certified through use of this list are considered verified as well.

The list may be used during the first 30 calendar days of the school year for determining free meal benefits and should be handled with the same level of confidentiality as is used with the applications for free and reduced-price meal benefits. The list may not be distributed to anyone other than those directly responsible for determining program eligibility.

Notification of Predetermined Eligibility

It is required that a written notice be sent to each household certified as eligible for free meal benefits through direct certification. The notice must advise them that: (a) their children are eligible for free meals; (b) no further application is required; (c) the household should notify the school if they do not want their children to receive free benefits; and (d) the household must notify the school when they are no longer certified to receive Food Stamps/TANF.

A full size version of the prototype letter of notification shown below may be found in Section 27 of this manual. SFAs should complete the letter by entering the name, address and telephone number of the contact person and the signature of the authorized representative in the signature block before reproducing on SFA letterhead. The school name can be deleted at the SFA's option. It is strongly recommended that no further reformatting be done.

Form 1 Section 9B
Notification of Predetermined Eligibility (Direct Certification)

Date: _____

Dear Parent or Guardian:

Because you are currently eligible to receive food stamps or TANF or both, your child/children have been pre-approved to receive free school lunch and breakfast. This pre-approval is for the following children:

Child/Children's Name(s)	School Name
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

At the beginning of the school year a letter to parents and an application for free and reduced-price meals are distributed to each household. Do not fill out or return an application for the child/children listed above. These benefits will start the first day of school. You must notify the school of loss of food stamp or TANF benefits. At that time it may be necessary to fill out an application for continuation of meal benefits.

If you do not want the free meals for your child/children, or if any of the above information is incorrect, or if you have any questions, please contact:

Name: _____
 Title: _____
 Address: _____
 Telephone: _____

Sincerely,

(Signature of Authorized Representative)

Non-discrimination Statement: This explains what to do if you believe you have been treated unfairly. In accordance with Federal law and U. S. Department of Agriculture policy, this institution is prohibited from discriminating on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, age, or disability. To file a complaint of discrimination, write to USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964 (voice and TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.

Predetermined Eligibles Submitting An Application

One of the difficulties encountered by reviewing officials with regard to the direct certification process is that households submit an application even after they have received the notification of predetermined eligibility. In an attempt to reduce the number of applications received for directly certified students, school officials are encouraged to send the notification of predetermined eligibility as early as possible. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has determined that if an application qualifying the student for free meals is received for a directly certified student during the first 30 calendar days of the school year, the direct certification may take precedent over the application.

Required Documentation

Documentation that a letter of notification was provided to the household must be maintained. Note the date that the letter of notification was provided to each household on the list beside the child's name or use another method compatible with existing SFA tracking systems.

Once the eligibility determination has been made from the direct certification list, retain the list as documentation for reimbursement claims. The list should be filed with the applications for free and reduced-price meals and should be readily retrievable by school.

Direct Certification of Siblings not Allowed

When a school official finds that one or more siblings of a directly certified child are not represented on the list, a meal application must be completed for that sibling. Only those students listed on the direct certification document are considered preapproved for free meals. All students receiving free meal benefits must either have an approved meal application on file or be identified and listed by name on the direct certification printout and/or

diskette provided from the State Office of School Food Services and Nutrition.

The SFA must also have a system for tracking directly certified children who transfer within the SFA.

Distribution of Applications: Option for Schools Implementing Direct Certification

The distribution of the letter to parents and application forms to households of all children enrolled in the SFA at the beginning of the school year is required to ensure that no child is inadvertently excluded from participation. SFAs that implement direct certification are not required to send the letter to parents and application form to those households eligible under direct certification if these materials are distributed through the mail, individual student packets, or other methods that prevent the overt identification of children eligible for direct certification. Under this option, households will receive either a letter to parents with an application or a letter notifying them that their children are eligible for free benefits.

Effects of Direct Certification on Verification

Households whose children are determined eligible through use of the direct certification list are exempt from verification requirements. When the SFA count of applications on file on October 31 is taken for the purpose of determining the number of applications to be verified, children directly certified should not be included in the count. Also, directly certified children should not be counted as verified. Implementation of direct certification will reduce the SFA's verification effort by reducing the number of applications on file, thus reducing the minimum required verification sample.

Questions Answers

1. Q. If a child was directly certified during the prior school year, may her/his benefits be carried forward to the current school year?

A. Prior year direct certification benefits may be carried forward only for the first 30 days of the current school year. If an application is not received from the household during this period, benefits must be terminated prior to the 31st operating day of the new school year.

2. Q. Is the direct certification list a complete listing of all children in the SFA eligible for free meal benefits?

A. No. There are two methods by which a child can receive free meal benefits—by direct certification and by application. Directly certified children are eligible to receive free meals for the current school year without further application. Households of all other students must complete the application process in order to be certified as eligible for free or reduced-price meal benefits.

3. Q. May the office(s) responsible for processing direct certification data release copies of the lists of certified students to individuals or other school program departments for non-program purposes?

A. No. The USDA has consistently maintained a policy that the information on the certification for free and reduced-price meal benefits is confidential and may not be released for any non-program purposes.

4. Q. If a student who is directly certified transfers from one SFA to another, does that certification also transfer?

A. No. Eligibility for free meals that results from direct certification does not transfer from one SFA to another. When a student moves or

changes residence it is always recommended that another meal application be completed.

5. Q. Is it required that the SFA retain a copy of the Letter of Notification sent to each directly certified household?

A. No. The SFA must retain a copy of the prototype Letter of Notification provided with the SFA's Policy Statement for Free and Reduced-Price Meals. Note the date the letter was provided to each household on the list beside the child's name or use another method compatible with the SFA's existing systems.

6. Q. Must a Letter of Notification be sent to the parent or guardian of children listed as directly certified but who are no longer enrolled in the SFA?

A. No. Children who are no longer enrolled are not eligible for free meal benefits.

Notes: